

June 25, 2010

Today, Congressman Joe Sestak signed on to a Congressional letter to President Obama expressing his strong support for Israel's right to defend itself, in light of the recent flotilla incident. He also issued the following statement indicating his continued support for direct negotiations between the Israelis and the Palestinian Authority, under U.S. mediation, as the only reliable path toward the ultimate goal of a peaceful, two-state solution.

"I support this letter and its intent. However, when discussing any particular incident or policy with regard to the Middle East, I believe we must always consider it within the context of our ultimate objective of a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Without this comprehensive context, I do not believe any letter adequately advances what I consider to be the region's, and therefore America's, vital security interest.

"A resolution to the conflict is the only outcome that can offer true security for Israel, the region, the United States, and our allies around the world, and we must be ready to do what it takes to see it through. While we recognize that there are forces, like Hamas, who seek only violence and destruction and who must be overcome, we must move forward with faith in our commitment to our special alliance with Israel, and to those who are dedicated to justice and freedom for all people, to encourage the sustained direct talks between Israel and the Palestinian Authority that will be necessary to bring about a just and lasting two-state solution.

"As we pursue peace, I truly believe the United States can meet our humanitarian interests in Gaza without impacting the vital interest of our, and Israel's, security."

Full text of the letter:

The President

The White House

Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to express our strong support for Israel's right to defend itself. We believe that it is in our national security interest to unequivocally reiterate that the United States stands behind our longtime friend and ally. Further, we urge you to remain steadfast in the defense of Israel in the face of the international community's rush to unfairly judge and condemn Israel in international fora such as the United Nations Security Council. We urge you to continue to use U.S. influence and, if necessary, veto power to prevent any biased or one-sided resolutions from passing.

On May 31, after repeated warnings, Israeli forces intercepted a flotilla attempting to break through its naval blockade of Gaza. The blockade of Gaza was instituted to stop terrorists from smuggling weapons into Gaza to murder innocent civilians. Since Israel's disengagement from Gaza in 2005, Hamas has fired more than 10,000 rockets and mortars at Israel's civilian population. Acknowledging the seriousness of the problem, Egypt also initiated its own blockade of Gaza along the Rafah crossing in 2007.

Over the course of its blockade, Israeli forces have diverted nine such flotillas, all without incident. The same was true for five of the six ships in this flotilla. They were commandeered peacefully and directed to the Israeli port of Ashdod. However, those aboard the largest ship, the Mavi Marmara, violently resisted. As dramatic video depicts, the passengers on the ship attacked Israeli soldiers with clubs, metal rods, and iron bars as they attempted to board the ship. The soldiers were brutally beaten and one was even thrown off the top deck. With their lives threatened, Israeli forces used necessary force as an act of self-defense and of last resort.

The several dozen who attacked the Israeli soldiers were not peaceful aid workers, but extremists who sought to aid the Iran-backed terrorist Hamas regime in Gaza. Days before, as broadcast on al-Jazeera, they proclaimed their willingness to be martyrs for the destruction of Israel, revealing a sinister element of premeditated violence. Furthermore, as confirmed by the State Department and intelligence agencies around the world, the Turkish aid group that sent out the flotilla, İnsani Yardım Vakfı (IHH), has met with senior officials of recognized terrorist groups over the last three years.

If the flotilla had been truly intent on bringing aid to Gaza, it could have done that. Israeli officials repeatedly offered their ports to harbor the ships and disperse the aid so that it would not go into the hands of corrupt Hamas officials but directly to the people living in Gaza. But the flotilla refused these overtures, instead revealing their intent to break the blockade and sail unchecked into Gaza. As you know, Hamas even refused the aid that was aboard the Mavi Marmara after it was inspected by Israeli officials.

The U.S. should make every effort to thwart international condemnation and focus the international community on the crimes of the Iran-backed Hamas leadership against Israel and the Palestinian people. As Israel faces increased threats, most recently from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which announced that it could provide a naval escort to any additional aid ships wishing to reach Gaza, the United States must continue to stand by Israel, one of our strongest allies.

We look forward to working with you on these vital issues affecting the U.S.-Israel relationship.